

Denise Rowe

Dance training in rural Zimbabwe, April 2014

Please find attached my final report for this project in rural Zimbabwe.

This project fully met its aims, furthering my dance training, offering incredible resources for choreography, rich opportunities for exchange and most strongly opening a door into the role played by dance and music in traditional Shona Culture, and walking me through that door.

On the other side of this door I feel strongly the call to embrace the power of dance and music in our lives here in the west and the vital connection between the sacred and the celebratory.

This connection was revealed through participation in three traditional Bira ceremonies. These formed the highlight of my trip, where dance and music form a bridge between the people and the spirits.

For future awardees my advice would be to follow what is unfolding and be awake to tangential opportunities that you had not considered, to be flexible, especially if travelling to a culture very different from your own.

My report will be published on my website and Facebook pages, and submitted for ADAD's hotfoot magazine.

Information will also be disseminated through the Earth Dances workshops programme, classes in education and the community and the newly formed Earth Dances training programme.

Many thanks again for your support.

Best wishes.

Denise Rowe

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Through the Mhararano Mbira Academy based in Devon, I was invited on a research visit to Mandere village in Northern Zimbabwe that would radically enrich my perception of dance.

I used this trip to research the inter-connection between dance, music, community, environment and ceremony through the mbira dances and music of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. I took dance and mbira lessons, conducted interviews, explored my own movement practice, immersed myself in village life and participated in three traditional Bira ceremonies.

This journey has widened my awareness of the vital role played by dance and music in the health of human beings and the crucial link between the sacred and the ceremonial.

The lessons

In rural Zimbabwe things operate differently to how they operate here in the UK. My lessons came at unexpected moments with a variety of teachers and in a variety of places including:

- * The kitchen in the middle of the night
- * The top of a mountain
- * The local library and cultural centre
- * The traditional bira ceremonies

Each lesson came at the right time with the right teaching. I consolidated dances I had learnt in the past and learnt new dances, mbira tunes, songs and rhythms and their inter-relationships.

I also had time to explore my own movement responses to the Zimbabwean landscape and share some elements of my practice with artists in Zimbabwe.

I had planned to travel to train more formally in Harare with Taurai Moyo but this turned out to be impractical. Sometimes as westerners we try to fit more into a schedule than there is really space or time for. It was a relief to postpone my training with Taurai for another trip.

By staying I was able to participate in more of the bira ceremonies. The trip was catalysed by the presence of Devon based mbira player Chartwell Dutiro. The reuniting of his family members and connections made with my ancestors meant that further ceremonies happened. This is the place where I received the most powerful teaching.

The ceremonies

Zimbabwe is never what I expect, it's always so much more! This was my third visit to Mandere village, home of the well respected spirit Medium Dominic Mandere. The major lesson of this trip was about the role of dance and music in ceremony. There were three main ceremonies that taught me the lesson

In traditional Shona culture dance and music are an essential part of ceremonies. Their powerful celebratory nature is believed to form a bridge between the everyday world of the people and the unseen world of the ancestors.

Participation

In the early evening of the first ceremony I was invited to participate. This was not just for my interest or to help me feel welcome or for the novelty factor, but the full participation of the people is what makes the ceremony work. For some this will mean singing, for others it will mean playing mbira or the powerful traditional drums. For me this meant dancing.

The ceremonies were a unique opportunity to join the dances and refine the movements in their true contexts, to experience firsthand the power of full participation from all of the community.

Before the final ceremony I had a dream. I dreamt I was in the ceremonial space and a wild and powerful dance came through me. In the final ceremony this dream became a reality. There was a moment where I realised how much holding back we do in the west, how much considering, weighing the options, making the right decision. Our attention is on being safe and in control, on trying to be in a place of knowing what is happening or going to happen.

The dance of the ceremony invited me outside of this place of safety and known-ness. This dance existed outside of this place. It required me to not know, it required 'me' to not be, so that the dance could come through.

The lesson was about the power of full-bodied participation, in dance and in life, about entering into the unknown and welcoming experiences that do not fit into words. We each have a call, or maybe they are many. The question is always about how we will respond to the call. Will we say yes to life?

The interviews

I recorded interviews with a dancer, a musician and a prominent village figure. All three spoke about dance, music and song being different aspects of the same thing and the crucial way they form a bridge between the people and their

ancestors, and that this is the reason for dancing. I will be transcribing the interviews for archive.

Outcomes of the project

Consolidation and expansion of my knowledge of traditional Zimbabwean dances, songs and rhythms (Shangara, Mbakumba, Mhande, Dhine, Chokoto, Jerusalem)

* These serve as material for teaching at **University of Plymouth, Mhararano Mbira Academy**, Schools, Colleges and Festivals across the UK and the **Earth Dances workshop programme**

* This has also led to the formation of **Shumba Arts** (Arts in education company)

Ongoing training as an mbira player

* Offering material for the **Ombivolum collective**

* Opening opportunities for performance with **Chartwell Dutiro**

* Deepening my understanding of the relationship between music and dance

New collaborative partnerships and shared practice

* Links created with mbira players and dancers in Zimbabwe with a view to future cross cultural collaboration (developed in August 2014)

* Initial plans made for an intensive research project in 2015

The fruits of Participation

* In depth understanding of the transformative power of dance and music

* Material for the performance piece **'She Who Walks the Bridge'**, shown at **The Place, London** and **Dartington Space** in May 2014. A tour is planned for 2015

* Crystalization and launch of the first ever **Earth Dances Training Programme**

* Initial research and development for a movement film on location in Zimbabwe

* Deeper connection with my own ancestry for personal development and healing

* Personal empowerment, clarity, health and well being and the ability to move things forward

Documentation

* Recorded interviews about the role of dance and music in village life, including ceremonies

* Documentation of my findings through film and keeping a daily journal

And finally... The dance

This dance is a re-arrangement of the space and all that is within the space. We become animated. We become in service. The dance is in service, to build the bridge across the stars, the bridge to spirit.

There is a place I go to where dance is truth. In this landscape of the body all concepts have fallen away, all that remains is stars. The dance is a dance of spirit and matter. It is a dance of ecstasy beyond reason.

The landscape the dancer travels is a landscape of the soul. At this threshold language falls silent, all that remains is poetry.

I leave you with words from my journal:

When the dance comes, she arrives like a tide
She opens me up, she casts me aside
Through her eyes I see we are all made of stars
Through her body I am destroyed to be reborn
We gather under her skirts
We rise in her ecstasy
There is no place for thought, no place for reason, no place for wondering
She pierces through the fabric of reality
This dance knows itself and is not know-able
This dance is only dance-able
This dance will break my heart
Over
And over
And over
Again